

THE BOY PONY EXPRESS RIDER

BY BUFFALO BILL

FROM "TRUE TALES OF THE PLAINS"



I WAS fourteen when I became a pony express rider. I had one or two adventures in that pursuit which may prove interesting to read. They were certainly interesting enough to me at the time. The job was worth \$125 a month and meant ceaseless danger.

The importance of the pony express has to a certain extent been lost sight of, but it might be well to impress on the reader the fact of its value at that time in connection with the great trouble occurring shortly after its inception between the sections of our country—the civil war of 1861. The difficulties of communicating with the newly acquired empire on the Pacific through the route via Panama or the passage around Cape Horn would have left effective information stale, flat and unprofitable on account of the time, and the fact that the southwest section was not open for communication to the Union authorities at Washington emphasized its necessity.

The pony express, by giving the government facilities for quick communication—quick for those days—was enabled to keep in touch with every movement and counteracted in an effective manner what might have resulted in a separation from us of our grand Pacific possessions.

Its service had been repeatedly suggested to congress, but after several years of agitation it failed of government assistance through the then disunited aims of many congressional leaders, and eventually it was undertaken by Messrs. Russell, Majors, Waddell & Co. at their own risk and responsibility, a public spirited, patriotic action for which they never received proper financial recognition.

This was the great government freighting firm under whom I had served as courier between its overland wagon trains. Its object was to cover the vast telegraphic gap between New York and San Francisco, which began at St. Joe, Mo., and ended at Sacramento, Cal., with greater speed, a distance of more than 2,000 miles through a country totally uninhabited, bar savage Indians. At that time it took months for congressmen and government officials to reach the Golden Gate or to arrive at Washington, and it took from twenty-two to twenty-five days to send a message from New York to San Francisco across the continent. It had taken stagecoaches three weeks or more to go from the Missouri river to Sacramento. By means of relay stations, 200 in number, employing 600 hardy experts and from eighty to a hundred expert riders, my employers made it possible for dispatches and messages written on tissue paper so as to avoid all unnecessary weight to be carried that distance on the backs of swift ponies in from eight to ten days. The route chosen is now traversed by the Union Pacific railroad, in those days an almost trackless wilderness, swarming with Indians and highwaymen.



On the 3d of April, 1860, two riders started, one from St. Joe, Mo., and one from Sacramento, Cal. At the start the dispatch bags would be thrown over a pony's saddle. The rider would mount and ride at top speed to the first relay station. There a fresh pony would be waiting, on whose back the dispatch bags would be hastily thrown, then off again, and so on till the "relay" rider would snatch the bags and dash off with them for the next lap of the long race. The relays averaged fifteen miles apart. Forty-five to 105 miles semiregularly each way at full speed over rough country was a rider's daily stunt. Riders started at forty-five mile trips and as they became

hardened took the longer trips, which naturally brought them larger pay. This was not an easy job for a fourteen-year-old boy. But I stuck to it in spite of aching bones and a tired head.

For the first three months I had no mishaps. I began to think the talk of danger was all bomb. Then as I was galloping around a curve on a hillside trail one day I rode flush up to a leveled pistol. The man behind it told me to throw up my hands. I obeyed. There is no use arguing with a loaded pistol. Frontiersmen in those days shot to kill. The road agent dismounted and walked up to me to take my saddlebags. I tried to look scared and harmless. He lowered his revolver as he reached for the bags. Just then I whirled my pony around. The little horse's plunge knocked the man off his feet, and a stray kick from one of the iron shod hoofs grazed the fellow's head, knocking him senseless. Having no further interest in him, I was glad enough to make my escape. Here is a further adventure of importance.

One day I galloped up to a relay station and found no relief pony waiting for me. Not a soul was in sight. But I heard men yelling and shooting down by the corral back of the station. I jumped off, rode in one hand and my twenty pound pouches in the other, and made for the trees that hid the corral from the trail. I thought from the noise that there must be an Indian raid there at least.

I reached the little clearing above the corral in time to see a gigantic buffalo bull charge through a bunch of cattle and rush on toward the doorway of the station. Four or five men were yelling at the top of their lungs and blasting away at him with guns and revolvers. But if any of the shots reached the brute they only served to madden him all the more. It was no business of mine, so I stood there laughing at their excitement. But all at once I stopped laughing and turned sick at what I saw.

There, near the door of the cabin, playing with a big wooden doll, sat a little girl perhaps three years old. She wore a little red cloak, and the bright bit of color had caught the mad buffalo's attention. Down at the unconscious playing baby charged the great, furious brute. The men saw her peril just when I did, and they fired wildly and came forward at a dead run. But they were too far away.

A woman ran screaming out of the house and rushed toward the child. She had no weapon of any kind and probably couldn't have used one if she had had. But I suppose mother love made her forget the horrible peril and she wanted to die with her little girl. Women are sometimes braver, I think, than men, especially where their children are concerned.

The buffalo was not fifteen yards away from the child when I brought my rifle instinctively to my shoulder. I wouldn't give myself time to think what must happen if I should miss. It was one of those times when a man must not fall in his aim.

Just then the baby looked up and saw the murderous brute. She clapped both hands and gave a squeal of delight. She probably thought the beast was some new sort of playmate.

As she called out I fired! The buffalo's legs seemed to tuck themselves up under him. The impetus of his rush carried him along the ground full ten feet, and he came to a stop with his head not six inches from the little girl's knee, stone dead.

Then after the men had pounded me on the back till I was sore the child's mother insisted on kissing me. How a healthy fourteen-year-old boy does long to be kissed!

Although among the youngest of the couriers, I seemed to have filled the bill and was promoted, as was Johnny Fry, to \$150 per month, but to a more dangerous route.

My age at the time of riding the pony express will naturally create attention and possibly surprise from the readers of the present day, as the youth at that age in the west—from fourteen to sixteen—was in many respects a man from the time he could shoulder a rifle or fire a pistol, with all a man's responsibility, bar voting. Of course I suppose in the centers of manufacture, indoor work or in mines it is necessary to protect children under the child labor law. But the conditions were such on the frontier that the boy acquired an early experience, and both the Indian boys and the white boys at the age of fourteen or fifteen were ranked in every way as factors to be accounted for on any occasions that arose demanding energy, stamina and pluck.

Hundreds of other boys at that time were in the same class as myself, ready, willing and able to do and dare—little men.

The importance to the white man of quick communication soon dawned on the Indians and aroused them to special endeavors to harness, intercept and kill off the messengers in charge of this work. Consequently after the first few weeks pony express riding became probably one of the most dangerous occupations known in the world's history, and my new route was the limit.

The reader can imagine that it was lonely. It demanded endurance above the ordinary to defy the summer's heat and winter's snowstorms and blizzards, skill in crossing temporary bridges and dangerous streams with shifting sands and treacherous quicksands, which had to be often got over at night, sometimes swollen torrents, and horses and riders had to swim, momentarily liable to amblush by the ever alert savages, then the monarchs of the prairies. The reader will understand that the Indian was master of all the country outside the rifle range of a station or fort. This gave to the very atmosphere a sense of continual peril, making possible a death so horrible that its possibility was as trying to the imagination as capture made its decree a certainty, with all the horrors of torture.

That many riders met this fateful end in history, while other escapes were simply miraculous. Those who came out alive on the arrival at a station often found that one of the riders had fallen a victim to the savage foe and had to take up his burden, and in such cases he had to pound the saddle over the stiff country for another hundred miles. The fact that the dead body was often somewhere along the trail, of course, did not add pleasant thoughts to the journey. Nothing but a quick perception and rapidity of action

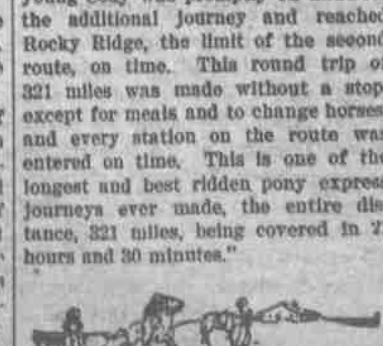


"The buffalo was almost upon the child when I fired."

and seemingly intuitive knowledge when danger threatened and the angel of good luck assisted me to escape many a close call. Several times I had bullets through my buckskins, twice through my saddle, and on one occasion my sturdy mount received a bad flesh wound. On two occasions my good marksmanship saved me at the expense of the roster of the Sioux braves by sending two at different times to their happy hunting grounds. On several occasions I had to resume the route of slaughtered couriers, notably on one occasion which stands as possibly a record in the story of this dangerous duty.

While riding between the Red Buttes of the Platte and the Three Crossings of the Sweetwater I had what was considered a most difficult and lonely route. On reaching Three Crossings I found the rider of the next division had been killed the night before, which necessitated my covering his route, and on arrival there the rider who should have been on hand had not turned up, having been killed, as was afterward ascertained, so I was compelled to ride the two routes without stop, except for meals and change of horses, successfully making the journey (or round trip) without sleep, only stopping to change horses and snatch a hasty meal. This ride created a sensation, so I will quote from an authority best able to place it on record as a historical fact—namely, Alexander Majors himself in his book of "Seventy Years on the Frontier."

"Among the most noted and daring riders of the pony express was Hon. William F. Cody, better known as 'Buffalo Bill,' whose reputation is now established the world over. While engaged in the express service his route lay between Red Buttes and Three Crossings. It was a most dangerous, long and lonely trail, including perilous crossings of swollen and turbulent streams. An average of fifteen miles an hour had to be made, including change of horses, detours for safety and time for meals. Once upon reaching Three Crossings he found that the rider on the next division had been killed during the night before, and he was called on to make the extra trip until another rider could be procured. This was a request the compliance with which would involve the most taxing labor and an endurance few persons are capable of. Nevertheless young Cody was promptly on hand for the additional journey and reached Rocky Ridge, the limit of the second route, on time. This round trip of 321 miles was made without a stop, except for meals and to change horses, and every station on the route was entered on time. This is one of the longest and best ridden pony express journeys ever made, the entire distance, 321 miles, being covered in 21 hours and 30 minutes."



New Year Cradle Song

By Ella Bentley

I THINK that up in the skies, most dear,
At the shrine of the rose hued east,
A mass is sung for the dying year.
With the moon for the vested priest,
And every star is an altar light,
And the church itself is the big, big night,
While you are the littlest acolyte.
(Sleep, my baby one, sleep.)

I THINK, most dear, that the prayer you say
Is the incense holy and sweet
You wait to God on the wings of day
When the night and the twilight meet,
And the sorrowful song that the north winds sing
When the winding sheet of the snow they bring
Is the dirge for the dear year's burying.
(Sleep, my baby one, sleep.)



I THINK, most dear, that those clouds you see
On the edge of the passing day
Are not the mist that they seem to be,
But friars and monks in gray,
And I think they're telling their rosaries, too,
And every bead is a drop of dew
That falls to the earth when its prayer is through.
(Sleep, my baby one, sleep.)

I THINK, most dear, in the world to me
That just as you are tonight
Somehow I wish you could always be—
God's littlest acolyte.
But slumber now for the dark is here,
And soon you'll open your eyes, most dear,
To greet the dawn of a different year.
(Sleep, my baby one, sleep.)

—New Orleans Times-Democrat.

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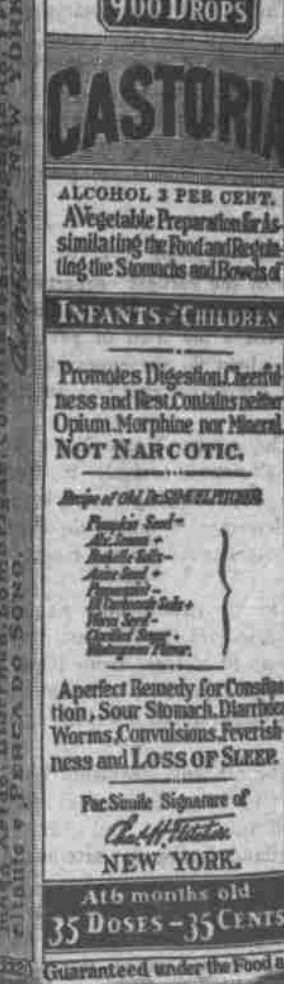
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